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The Small Old Path

by Claude Bragdon

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CLAUDE BRAGDON

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Second Edition

"The small, old path stretching
far away has been found by me."

—*Brihadâranyaka Upanishad.*

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OBJECTS OF THE THEOSOPHICAL SOCIETY

First—To form a nucleus of the Universal Brotherhood of Humanity without distinction of race, creed, sect, caste, or color.

Second—To encourage the study of Comparative Religion, Philosophy, and Science.

Third—To investigate unexplained laws of nature and the powers latent in man.

THE Theosophical Society is composed of students, belonging to any religion in the world or to none, who are united by their approval of the above objects, by their wish to remove religious antagonisms and to draw together men of goodwill whatsoever their religious opinions, and by their desire to study religious truths and to share the results of their studies with others. Their bond of union is not the profession of a common belief, but a common search and aspiration for Truth. They hold that Truth should be sought by study, by reflection, by purity of life, by devotion to high ideas, and they regard Truth as a prize to be striven for, not as a dogma to be imposed by authority. They consider that belief should be the result of individual study or intuition, and not its antecedent, and should rest on knowledge, not on assertion. They extend tolerance to all, even to the intolerant, not as a privilege they bestow, but as a duty they perform; and they seek to remove ignorance, not to punish it. They see every religion as an expression of Divine Wisdom, and prefer its study to its condemnation, and its practice to proselytism. Peace is their watch-word, as Truth is their aim.

HISTORY OF THE THEOSOPHICAL SOCIETY

THE Theosophical Society was founded by Madame H. P. Blavatsky and Colonel H. S. Olcott, in 1875. *Colonel Olcott was the first President and he held the office continuously until his death in* 1907, *serving in that capacity thirty-two years. The office thus vacated by death was filled by the election of Mrs. Annie Besant. The headquarters of the Society are at Adyar, Madras, India, and National Sections and Branches exist in various nations throughout the world. Annual conventions are held by the National Sections and biennial conventions by the Society, the place of meeting for the latter being some European city. Anybody desiring further information about the Society should address*

A. P. WARRINGTON,
Secretary of the American Section,
of the Theosophical Society,
Krotona, Hollywood,
Los Angeles, California.

LIST OF THEOSOPHICAL BOOKS RECOMMENDED

(These may be obtained at the above address)

AN OUTLINE OF THEOSOPHY, C. W. Leadbeater.

LIGHT ON THE PATH, Mabel Collins.

THE ANCIENT WISDOM, Annie Besant.

THE GROWTH OF THE SOUL, A. P. Sinnett.

THE SECRET DOCTRINE, H. P. Blavatsky.

IN HIS NAME, C. Jinarajadasa.

AT THE FEET OF THE MASTER, J. Krishnamurti.

THE SMALL OLD PATH

AS long ago as 1845 DeQuincy wrote regarding certain sinister tendencies of the times, "Unless this colossal pace of advance can be retarded (a thing not to be expected), or, which is happily more probable, can be met by counter forces of corresponding magnitude, forces in the direction of religion and profound philosophy that shall radiate centrifugally against this storm of life so perilously centripetal toward the vortex of the merely human; left to itself, the natural tendency of so chaotic a tumult will be to evil; for some minds to lunacy, for others a re-agency of fleshly torpor."

The "storm of life" shows small signs of abatement, rather of augmentation; yet to a few aloof and clear-eyed watchers there are presages of change. Such discern in the "profound philosophy" of Eastern Esoteric Science, one of those "counter forces" for which De Quincy scanned the horizon of his time in vain.

"The Awakening of the East" is a phrase in many mouths, already outworn by too frequent use. To most men it means the acceptance and assimilation of the civilization of

Europe by the nations of Asia, but there are some who believe that it means far more than this; namely, that the ancient ideals of the East, disseminated throughout the West and germinating in the secret hearts of men, may ameliorate, and perhaps put an end to that insane competition for wealth, that struggle for mere mastery, which threatens to devastate the modern world.

Such reactions between peoples differently educated and endowed, by means of which each gains something of the quality of the other, are the truly significant events in the history of civilization, the effect of war and commerce as a cause. The interchange of opposite polarities between West and East is already established, by reason of the contact and commingling of races brought about by England's tenure of India, and by the succession of events—unexpected, unprecedented—following the war between China and Japan. In exchange for our efficiency in things mundane and temporal, Asia offers us that secret science of the soul, her Ancient Wisdom.

Through what channels is this new knowledge entering the consciousness of the West? They are many and various, and they so ramify and intersect that any enumeration is difficult. First in point of time, and also of importance, are the translations of the Sacred

Books of the East and the literature which has grown up about them, not leaving out of account the importation and interpretation of works of Oriental art—an art which is in its very nature religious and symbolical. Second, may be named the lucid and sympathetic presentation of Eastern ideas and ideals by such men as the late Sir Edwin Arnold, the late Lafcadio Hearn, and Fielding Hall, together with the work of many writers of less note, who have experienced the potency at first hand. Third, there is what may be called the missionary movement to the West, so dramatically inaugurated by the late Swami Vivekananda in his now historic address before the World's Congress of Religions held in Chicago during the Columbian Exposition, and continued by the Vedanta and other societies. And, fourth, there is modern Theosophy, the most comprehensive, precise and authoritative re-statement of the Ancient Wisdom which, in the opinion of the author, has yet appeared in the West.

The average intelligent and well-educated person, informed on most subjects likely to engage his attention, thinks of Theosophy—if he thinks of it at all—as some grotesque form of superstition imported from the Orient, the fad or affectation of a small body of fools and fanatics seeking to appear superior to the rest of humankind.

This shallow, prejudiced, newspaper view is held most tenaciously, it would appear, by the very persons to whom the scientific spirituality of the Ancient Wisdom, if thoroughly understood, would make the strongest appeal: those who can find no solace in the religion of to-day, nor satisfaction in a purely materialistic science. Such, secure in their belief that out of the East and out of the past no extension of knowledge, no enrichment of life, can come, shut themselves away by their attitude from two things of which they stand in urgent need: an illuminating and inspiring view of life and of the world, verifiable by experience; a system of self-development leading to peace, power, and transcendent knowledge.

Theosophy, with its exalted viewpoint and great sweep, its precise and elaborate classifications, its unfamiliar terms, must needs appear, to the uninitiated, complicated and vast; but a great simplicity lies behind its seeming complexity, a great familiarity behind its seeming strangeness. The several concepts conform to, and confirm one another, and shape themselves at last into a single symmetrical solid of simple shape, but having many faces.

Theosophy claims much—which accounts, perhaps, for the prevailing prejudice against it—but every one of its tenets stands the test of reason and is verifiable by experience.

Moreover, its teachings are being confirmed by scientific investigation, and though the grandest still remain unverified, they are not contradicted by any knowledge. Science advances facing backward: all it can say to man for solace and instruction is, *"You are what you have become."* Theosophy, fronting the far horizon, says, *"Become what you are!"* And to the inevitable question, "What, then, are we?" it gives the following four-fold reply:

YOU ARE BROTHERS. The substance of all things, coarse and subtle, is perpetually interchanging; health and disease, thought and emotion, are communicable, contagious. You cannot live apart from one another any more than from nature. *Become what you are*: the children of one mother; act, think and feel in and with everything that lives. *"This is the truth. As from a blazing fire, sparks, being like unto fire, fly forth a thousand fold. Thus are various beings brought forth from the Imperishable, my friend, and return thither also."*

YOU ARE IMMORTAL. The force within you knows no cessation, hastes not, nor rests as it aspires. *Become what you are*: heir to all the ages; think, feel, act as an immortal being. *"I know this undecaying ancient one, the self of all things, being infinite and omnipresent."*

LAW GOVERNS YOU. By knowledge of the law in little things you have transformed the earth and harnessed its forces. Take the next step, *Become what you are*: administrators of the Good Law in your own lives and the lives of others. *"The gift of the law exceeds all gifts; the sweetness of the law exceeds all sweetness; the delight in the law exceeds all delights."*

THAT LAW IS LOVE. All things are harmoniously held together by an attraction which is only the lowest and outermost expression of an all-embracing, all-sustaining love. *Become what you are*: the interpreters and transmitters of that ineffable love. *"As even at the risk of her life a mother watches over her child, her only child, exert good will without measure toward all beings."*

Theosophy being, as the word implies, Divine Wisdom, it concerns itself not alone with religion, but with philosophy, science, art, industry, and every human activity; it is the unifying principle of them all. In this brief compass only one or two aspects can be dealt with, and those only cursorily; the religious, being the most fundamental, receiving consideration first.

The theosophic teaching is that there has never been but one religion in the world, the

Ancient Wisdom, and that all differences between faiths are differences of form and not of content, colorations caused by the refracting medium, the mind of man, in receiving and transmitting the white light of a truth received, "in the dark backward and the abysm of time" from spiritual teachers—supermen. Moreover, the same emancipating truth lies dormant in each individual, being slowly stirred into life within the unfolding consciousness through a long succession of correlated lives of ever-augmenting intensity. It thus appears that man's spiritual evolution, like all evolutionary processes, is effected both by impulses from without: worldly experience lighted by religious teaching; and from within: the shining of the Inward Light.

The Ancient Wisdom has come down to us, as we ourselves have come down, from the fecund mother of all our Western races, the Aryan, which, emerging from pre-historic darkness upon the lighted stage of universal history in that fair garden of the world south of the Himalayas, is there discovered in the full enjoyment of a civilization already overripe. The primal wisdom of the parent race flowed, a variously colored stream, from India westward to Assyria and Egypt; to Judea, to Greece, to Rome; eastward and northward to China and Thibet, Japan and Korea, ramify-

ing in every direction like the branches of a great tree. Now any religion, in order to prevail popularly, must suffer a certain sort of degeneration. For this reason, the Ancient Wisdom, misunderstood and materialized by the ignorant, perverted by priestcraft and put to base uses to serve selfish ends, has needed renewal, has periodically required re-statement in a manner adapted to the necessities of the times and to the racial peculiarities of the people of those times. Thus are religions born of the one religion, which remains the inner inspirer of them all.

This recurrent restoration to man of those essential verities whereby, unknowing, he is led along "the small, old path, leading far away," has ever been effected (such is the teaching) by the willing self-sacrifice of those who have trod that path in ages past. Every new religious impulse in the world can be traced to the appearance upon the scene of some great Founder. All such are *avataras,* descents into incarnate existence of men for whom the necessity of reincarnation has ceased, save for the helping of mankind. They come when they are needed, to rebuild, on the one broad and ancient foundation, that temple of truth which the ignorance and folly of man is ever throwing down. Such are the Masters, the *men behind,* concerning whom

so much nonsense has been talked and written, since their presence as a factor in human evolution has been made known.

The only logical explanation of the mystery of the Masters may appear to those accustomed only to Western modes of thought even more incredible than the mystery itself, since it involves, as has been hinted, the idea of reincarnation—of the development of the individuality by means of successive returns to earthly existence in different bodies. This idea, familiar to two-thirds of the human family to-day, of all but universal acceptance in ancient times, is again finding place—greatly to its enrichment—in the excellently arranged, but rather austerely furnished, chamber of modern consciousness.

By reason of this evolution through repeated existences, of which no beginning can be traced, nor any end, it is inevitable that some should outstrip their fellows in the long journey; for we observe the thing happening all about us within the smaller compass of our daily lives. These early ripening intelligences when they have attained to a certain proficiency in life (far above any proficiency known to us) become, by occult means, aware of one another, and then, helped mutually, and by others still higher—the garnered harvest of antecedent evolutions—their progress becomes

increasingly rapid, until they transcend humanity as we know it altogether. Moved by compassion for the upward struggling millions, some of them (and these are the Masters) postpone the bliss of their Nirvana and band together to be the teachers, the saviors, the conservers of the accumulated wisdom of mankind, and particularly of that *Theo-Sophia*—Divine Wisdom—which may be defined as the knowledge of the law according to which the spirit manifests itself.

Such, briefly, is the theosophic teaching with regard to revealed religion: it is a body of truths concerning man's nature, origin and destiny, accumulated and conserved throughout some antecedent cycle of evolution, and imparted to developing humanity—as knowledge is imparted to a child, at different times and in different ways, in conformity with its growing receptivity—by wise and loving teachers. These are for the most part unseen, though always accessible, and at critical periods of history, "when the old order changeth, yielding place to new," they incarnate physically in order to repeat the oft-reiterated lesson of man's solidarity in divinity, to lay down the lines along which the coming generations shall advance, and to show forth in their own persons that perfection to which all shall one day attain. The Ancient Wis-

dom never changes: its glowing truths, like the brilliants of a kaleidoscope, fall from time to time—in obedience to the cyclic law—into a different order, and so make a different pattern. The fact that the present happens to be one of these transitional periods—the moment of the turning of the cosmic kaleidoscope—brings us to the consideration of the theosophic teaching with regard to cycles—*yugas*—those more obscure, because longer, divisions of time than days, months, years, and like them astronomical.

Each return of the earth to the same place in the ecliptic marks the intervals of a year, during which nature has hymned through her accustomed rhythms and returned: man also, at the bountiful breast of the great mother, has shared in her successive moods and repeats them as she does, *de capo*. The same thing being true in the large as in the little, we conceive of that march of events which we call history, not as a straight line of infinite extension, but as a circle, or rather a spiral (for the earth's path, by reason of the sun's motion, is a spiral), which in its return brings the to-morrow of the world nearer to some long-vanished yesterday than to the passing hour. Punctually by that sidereal clock whose dial is the blue vault of heaven, whose numerals are the constellations, whose moving

shadow is the Self within all beings, the same influences begin to operate which have been before in operation, bringing to birth in the world those soul-groups that produced some ancient civilization which they strive, in obedience to karma (the higher law of causation), to realize again and recreate. But the conditions are all different: they themselves are different, too, and this makes the resultant civilization analogous to, yet different from, its predecessor in the past.

Theosophy thus recognizes the recurrence, at rhythmic intervals upon the plane of objective existence, of differently "colored" groups of individuals, each group concertedly —though for the most part blindly, automatically—striving for the dominance of those ideas and emotions familiar, and therefore dear to it, in an environment determined for it by some previous group, cherishing a different order of ideas and ideals; affecting, and being in turn affected by, the existing conditions.

Does not this bare statement of the law of Reincarnation and of Cycles render history more intelligible? Does it not cast an illuminating light upon the present, since the present is perceived to be one of those moments of transition in which the existing order yields to one different in kind? It would be vain to trace in detail the forces of disintegration and

of reconstruction, the signs of which so abound on every hand; but it is not difficult to determine the new direction in which the current of modern life now sets. It is towards the formation of larger units, an effort toward solidarity in many different fields. It would seem as though the repulsive force which has determined and controlled human action for thousands of years was at last exhausted, and that this was giving place to its complementary force, the attractive. In business the tendency shows itself in world-wide combinations both of labor and of capital; in world politics by an alert and anxious diplomacy directed toward the maintenance of peace between nations and fair dealing by the strong towards the weak; in social life by the spread —not always under the name of socialism—of socialistic ideas, and the tendency away from competition and toward co-operation; in religion by the coming together of the denominations for the purpose of embarking in common undertakings, world-wide in their scope; and in the individual by the growing consciousness that private virtue and personal happiness must not and cannot be purchased at the cost of another's misery and sin.

From the viewpoint of Theosophy, these various social phenomena are not accidental or sporadic, but are controlled by the Masters of

Wisdom, who direct human evolution in such a way as to bring men at last to a realization of the literal truth of the ancient saying, "Time ripens and dissolves all beings in the Great Self."

As a concept, though not yet as a law of conduct, this view is gaining ground in the West. Modern experimental science, with its increasing power to disintegrate and recompose, points inevitably to the conclusion that the so-called chemical elements are but various modes of manifestation—various rates and kinds of vibration—of one universal medium; man is no longer considered apart from nature, and instead of regarding man and nature as the manifestation of blind and unintelligent force, it is no longer considered unscientific to think of the primal force as intelligence, as consciousness—as God. Such a view may be named animism, or pantheism, by Christians, but it is in perfect accord with the thought contained in that newly discovered saying of Jesus, "Lift the stone, there thou shalt find me; cleave the wood, and there am I."

The intimate interdependence of all things and all men is forced home as never before in history, by reason of our delicately adjusted, freely communicating, perilously poised civilization, wherein millionaires in snug offices turn out men to labor in far countries, wherein

a corner in the Chicago wheat pit causes a bread riot in the cities of Lombardy, and the price of cotton in New York is a matter of moment to the loom workers of Manchester. As never before, men are learning to control nature by co-operation, and this is the first step toward the recognition and acceptance, with all its corollaries and consequences, of the great fact of human brotherhood which is to be the keynote of the coming civilization. The beauty and blessedness of mutual help and mutual love are still so far from being realized, however, that the necessity for brotherly action is being enforced sometimes at terrible cost. The diseases bred by poverty in the slums are transmitted to homes favored and fortunate; one sex suffers secretly for the incontinence of the other; the murderer's hand is unstained by the blood of the victim, and the prisoned expiate offenses committed by the free.

There are other ways even more urgent in which this law of brotherhood is being pressed home: latent potencies are awakening in human beings—potencies so strange, so disturbing, so subversive of accepted theories that it is small wonder that they have been denied and derided and assigned to the realm of the merely pathological.

In the light of all these evidences of human solidarity and of the astounding and even terrible uniformity of the laws of nature, the world should be ready for the theosophic teaching that the sense of separateness with which each one of us goes through life is only the last and the greatest of the many illusions of our fleshly state.

This idea of human solidarity is not unfamiliar, having found frequent and beautiful expression in poetry, philosophy and every religion worthy of the name. The value of the theosophic presentation of it lies in the convincing completeness and lucidity with which it is demonstrated to the intelligence, and the practical and scientific method of training whereby this unity may not only be realized as a truth, but experienced as a fact. Each man is himself the Eternal Thinker, according to the ancient teaching, thinking non-eternal thoughts. "Now if a man worships another deity, thinking the deity one and he another, he does not know, because the two are one." With a sublimely simple and unswerving logic, self-knowledge is made the key to the All-self. "This thou art," the disciple is taught that he must be able to say to himself with regard to every being, however humble or however high. So saying and believing, he becomes that which he is: he transcends his

illusory personality and unites himself with the Self beyond all suffering. A moment's reflection will make it plain that one who has attained to a realization, never absent from his thought, of the unity of all beings, must have accepted a law of conduct above selfishness: his consciousness is no longer filled by his will; he has given up all that throng of desires, with their constant hopes and fears; he has entered into lasting happiness and peace.

Nothing has been so prejudicial to Theosophy as its esotericism; for, while many things are revealed which were once secret, the veil is only lifted, it is not cast utterly aside. Theosophy gives forth only a certain portion of that Secret Doctrine of which the dogmas, allegories and symbols of all religions are so many veils, concealing—save to the clairvoyance of pure hearts—the living form within.

The idea of secrecy is in itself highly repugnant to the Occidental mind, which prides itself upon the ability to subject everything to the test of reason; to determine all values by that criterion alone. But the Masters of Wisdom know human nature better than it knows itself. As it is said in the Upanishads, "The highest mystery in the Vedanta, delivered in a former age, should not be given to one whose passions have not been subdued." The Virgin of the World, *Theo-Sophia,* has ever been

screened from the vision of the vulgar because there are few who can look on naked Truth with noble eyes. Unveiled, she is in danger of violation; men would prostitute her to ignoble uses, and so defeat their own regeneration. The best thing in the world may become, in this way, the most baleful. This is no idle figure of speech, as will be shown.

What is the most potent force in life? That which effects its renewal, and insures its perpetuity: the love of the sexes. Although this love is the greatest power for good, and leads to the highest felicity, its perversion—the transforming of a sacrament into a sensual indulgence—is the prolific cause of disease, prostitution, degeneracy, and secret misery untold. Now Theosophy—true religion—is man's seeking for union, not with any earthly mistress, but with the divine part of his own nature. It is therefore the self-same force of love, acting on planes higher than the physical—higher, even, than the human. As such, it is even more susceptible of abuse and degradation than is the love of the sexes, and the attendant consequences are even more inimical to happiness and health. In the individual these appear as egomania, insanity, obsession; in society they take the form of religious wars, tyrannies, persecutions, inquisitions, and all cruel, monstrous and obscene rites and idolatries practiced in the name of religion.

The Wisdom Religion teaches that the unmanifest God is without attributes, but the manifest God is love, is bliss. And because the manifest God is the divinity in man himself, as water runs downward, so runs the divine in man to happiness, to bliss. So also is man pursued by the divine love, the Hound of Heaven. "Him who eats food, him I eat as food," say the Upanishads. The Christian mystic who said, "I am as necessary to God as God is necessary to me," perceived the same truth and uttered it in slightly different fashion.

Nature, that "allegory of the spirit," patiently publishes the fact that God is love, moment by moment and in a myriad ways. Love is attraction, that attraction which holds the planet true to its orbit, and all its particles together, making it a garden of firm earth and flowing water. If that attraction—that love—intermitted for one moment, all would be dissipated, like a burst bubble, into fathomless space. Love is heat, that heat which melts the winter snows, sets free the ice-locked springs and rivers, warms the seed, starts the sap, and makes sweet tumult in the blood. Love is light, the scorching blaze of solar conflagrations transmuted into beauty and beneficence, painting the world with glory. Love is fire, tamed to man's uses, a roaring giant in har-

ness. Love is the gold of man's desire, planting cities, spreading civilizations. Love is a seeking and a finding of the sun by the flower, of the flower by the bee. Love is the mother's solicitude, the father's labor, the lover's ardor and devotion. Love leads the mind to knowledge, the heart to understanding—"Self unto self, where all the rest are slain."

This, then, is the very core and kernel of the Wisdom Religion, that God is love: that where love is there is God also. How familiar it is to the West, through the teachings of Christ—how familiar, yet how little regarded! Those to whom Christ is the Way, the Truth, and the Life should have no quarrel with any who have been enabled to set their feet upon "the small, old path, leading far away" by means of the new light now streaming from the East; for it may well be that Christ Himself has caused that light to shine forth upon the world in preparation for His coming, that He may draw *all men* unto Him.

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